

## From Rouse's Point to Bug Light

An Armchair Tour through  
Historic Spots of Duxbury Beach

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

Let us begin our armchair tour at the east end of Gurnet Bridge and walk in imagination north to the end of the parking lot. A short distance ahead to the right stands the Duxbury Public Beach House, and just beyond that we can see a high bluff, which is called Rouse's Point. It was just below this that the French Atlantic cable landed in 1869 a tag end of which still protrudes from the sandy beach at low tide.

The story of the laying of this cable and its landing here 3,333 miles from its origin in Brest, France, is ably set forth in a booklet authored by Franklin Hoyt and published by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society.

A half-mile beyond this bluff in Brant Rock and out of sight from here, lie 4 gigantic concrete blocks weighing several tons that anchored an enormous wireless tower I remember seeing often from my backyard. This tower sent electric impulses across the Atlantic when in the days before radio and TV it was believed necessary that these impulses limit direction to a straight line. Not far from this side of these blocks on the Marshfield border, lies Canal St., so named from the waterway dug by the Pilgrims in 1636 to allow shallop passage to the ocean from Duxbury Bay without braving Gurnet currents.

Looking northwest to the edge of this vast expanse of marsh stands a small grove of cedar trees called Pine Point, now owned by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, to mark this spot as the town picnic area in the late 1800's where the Congregational Church Sunday School would hold its annual picnic and the town would declare a holiday. Farther to the left and about the middle of this side of the marsh, a straw-thatched structure of some size can be seen that served as a duck blind during the hunting season and many spicy legends linger around its use as a transfer facility during rum-running days.

The extreme northwest corner of this marsh, right on the Marshfield town line, used to boast for many years one of the largest boat landings in the area, called Bourne's Wharf. This was where the packet boat landed at high tide with its cargo of national celebrities to be met by dozens of horse-drawn coaches and driven to Daniel Webster's funeral shortly after his death on Oct. 17, 1852.

It may be pertinent to point out that in this heroic man, this area included perhaps the greatest orator in American history. It is a fact that many historians consider Webster's address at Plymouth on Dec. 22, 1820, his greatest oration. Ten thousand people stood for 2 hours in the bitter cold riveted to the ground as he spoke.

George Ticknor, founder of Boston's prestigious Public Library, then a young man, reported on his experience. "I never was so excited by public speaking in my life. Three or 4 times I thought my temples would burst with the gush of blood." Here this massive man towering over 6 feet high, his eyes flashing like lightning, his cavernous brow crowning his high ruddy cheekbones, his voice ringing out like the trumpet of doom, rising and falling in easy cadences, reflected on the courage and faith of the Pilgrims and called on all Americans to show the same courage, idealism and compassion for other nations, that this pioneering venture exemplified with. Such oratory scholars place this man in a direct line with Demosthenes, Burke and later Abraham Lincoln and William Jennings Bryan. My sister Ruth reports that Daniel Webster was a frequent patron of Ford's Store, America's first department store, and often visited Duxbury, so I hope it's not stretching a point to claim him as one our own.

Now, continuing our armchair tour, we walk back to the Gurnet Bridge. This present structure built of hardened tropical wood, was built by the town in 1987 at a cost of \$3,000,000. It replaces one that was built from 1892 to 1895 at a cost of \$30,000, one third of which was paid by Duxbury's number one philanthropist, the Wrights.

The Wright family had bought the beach from the town and laid out 263 house lots hoping to make a popular seashore colony. But blizzards of 1888 and 1889 which leveled the sand dunes of the beach by several feet, convinced them to abandon the plan. They still made good on their pledge, the other 2 thirds of the cost of construction being borne by Plymouth, Kingston and Duxbury and Plymouth County. These also shared in the maintenance of the bridge until 1941 when the Town of Duxbury took it over. Residents of Gurnet and Saquish pay no costs for this right of way for they are Plymouth citizens.

We now turn back in imagination to the beach itself.

Looking south we see a large area of brush and small cedars. This we call High Pines. A hundred yards due east from here lies a red spar buoy marking the end of a shoal of sand and rock that has fouled up many a craft. I remember the minesweeper *Swan* caught here in a storm and beached for several months. The beach used to boast



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dunes 35 and 40 feet in height. It was a natural for our tenderfoot Boy Scout cookouts and overnights. Scooping a fire pit, lining it with smooth round stones, gathering dry driftwood above the high water mark and then cooking our supper. We would make lean-to's with our Boy Scout poles and tarpaulins placed against the dunes. No fire permits were required then. It was later on that the beach furnished landing spots for rum-runners. In my day and part of my work as assistant in running my father's meat market, I helped provision gunning stands that lined the beach from just this side of High Pines through to Clark's Island. It is difficult to imagine today how these elaborate establishments would hide below the tops of sand dunes, and furnish living quarters of a dozen men with decoy ducks and geese moored in the marshes in front. Their chief asset was what were called "flyers" who would soar up and into a tiring flock of ducks or geese, take over their leadership and swing them down in front of the stand and where after carefully selecting bird targets, gunners would open fire and retrieving dogs would swim out and bring them in.

There used to be several houses on the beach, 3 of which remained to my day and were towed by tugboat under the direction of Walter Prince around into Kingston Bay where they remain as sturdy as ever near the end of Landing Road. One family still remains on the beach, the house and outbuildings hidden by cedars and towering poison ivy in High Pines. Today this section of the beach amply fulfills the name I have given it as a recreational area, now filled to overflowing on hot summer days by 4x4 vehicles.

We now walk in imagination to the Gurnet. The Gurnet area used to include 80 acres of arable land with much green grass and from Colonial times until the late 1800's it was the dairy farm for the Plymouth colony. One of the earliest notations in the Colonial records is an ordinance forbidding the pasturing of cows on the beach itself as their sharp hoofs killed the beach grass and caused erosion. The most conspicuous object on Gurnet is the lighthouse.

This was first established in 1768, 10 years after Boston Light, and increased to 2 lights in 1843 and back to one in 1924. It was a fixed light at first and then turned into a revolving one as it is today.

The Coast Guard took over a portion of the bluff for a life-saving station back in the 1880's, a service which was discontinued in 1955. The concrete lookout was built during the early days of World War II as a watchdog against Nazi submarines when the beach was also patrolled regularly by the Navy and the Coast Guard.

At low tide if we look toward Manomet a huge sandy shoal appears just below the surface of the water, called Brown's Bank. Legend has it that this was once an island with trees and houses on it. And if we recognize that 10,000 years ago during the ice age as we follow the late Fred Potter's research, the ocean began several miles out. Melting ice brought deep water covering the continental shelf. We are currently being warned that global warming will melt our polar ice caps in the same way and floor our coastal cities to a depth of 10 feet.

Saquish was a heavily fortified outpost during the war of 1812, and the name "Fort Standish" still marks its boundaries on old navigation charts. Barrack areas and redoubts for cannon can still be discerned here. It was just opposite here in 1782 that a British frigate the *Albemarle* hove to, its crew having been laid low by an attack of scurvy. Some Americans were hailed and ordered to obtain a supply of fresh vegetables to counteract the illness. (This story is recounted by Jack Post in *The Duxbury Book*.) The captain of this vessel was named Horatio Nelson who as we know would distinguish himself in a crucial naval battle off Trafalgar on Oct. 21, 1805, defeating the combined fleets of Spain and France and eliminating Napoleon's threat to invade England. Nelson was knighted by the king for his victory and a statue of him can be seen in the undercroft of St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

The Gurnet and Saquish as I have said were primarily a dairy farm in Colonial times and on into the 1880's. A change took place here then, and vestiges of it can still be seen when hotels, bars, bowling alleys and dance halls filled the area. It became the playground of Plymouth. *Duxbury Clipper* files contain a photograph of a team of oxen hauling a wagon-load of passengers the length of the beach to enjoy its tourist attractions. I find it hard to picture events like these, being jolted and shaken for 6 miles of sandy travel on a journey often from Green Harbor railroad station. The preferred transportation to Gurnet from Plymouth was by boat. In my day, spots like Mayflower Grove on Silver Lake and Nantasket Beach provided thrills and excitement, but now even they have disappeared into the dustbin of history.

Today Gurnet has reverted to its earlier use a navigational facility and a modest summer resort. A very small contingent of stalwart souls remains all year 'round, but both Gurnet and Saquish come alive only in summer. Its light casts a bright beam of white light through 75% of a circle, and for the rest a red beam to warn seafarers of the dangers of Brown's Bank. When I was a lad, Saquish was a kind of never-never land with only perhaps a half dozen houses. It was a very popular picnic and swimming spot for the young of the Duxbury



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Yacht club. Today it boasts almost a hundred houses, a scant few occupied all year 'round.

Bug Light, so-called it is said because of its bug-like appearance from a distance at high tide sitting on the top of the waves, was built in 1871 to mark the end of the sand bar that extends from the southern end of Clark's Island. According to *Thatcher's History of Plymouth* it was a common experience for "dare devil young blades" after a night of carousing and holiday-making, to swim a horse down this bar, cross the channel to Plymouth Beach and ride on into downtown Plymouth. When I asked our harbormaster, Don Beers, about this he said it was still common practice today but without a horse. Beyond the Bug and well into Kingston Bay stands Plymouth Cordage, where ocean-going vessels sailed to unload their cargoes of sisal from Calcutta and hemp from the Philippines. As they completed their journey they would pass through a section of the bay named on old navigation charts "The Cowyard." This name refers to dairying days when milk cows would line up outside the cow-barn on local farms waiting to go in for the evening milking. Ships lines up in this deeper area of the bay waiting for high tide to carry them into the wharfs of Plymouth, and Duxbury would take on a similar appearance.

My nephew Richard Krueger, now living in Kingston and a Coast Guardsman of some 28 years, recalls the manning of Bug Light from the pool of guardsmen stationed at Gurnet. Two men assigned to the Bug from this crew would alternate stays here with 14- and 7-day stretches. At first they would row their dory to Plymouth for supplies, and later when outboard motors were available they would motor over, raising the boat on davits between journeys. In recent years the bright red light has been operated from Gurnet. I remember often seeing the men here and waving to them as I sailed by, thinking what a wonderful place this would be to get caught up on my reading.

Not long ago the Coast Guard announced a plan to demolish the Bug and replace it with a white fiberglass facility run automatically. But the hue and cry that went up from residents of the 3 towns bordering on this body of water was so strident that thanks to our vigilant Harbormaster Don Beers, and a citizen's committee, it has been saved. It was felt that the removal of this antique item in this waterway would be equivalent to dismantling the Myles Standish Monument. So it stands and resists the effort to eliminate our historic landmarks that give certain stability to our past and present.

Duxbury Beach remains as well despite the ravages of time and carries within it far more secrets than this brief essay can include. Like much of our heritage, we are beginning to realize this can only be continued by strenuous efforts on the part of all of us. Joe Grady and the Beach Committee of the town are doing a splendid job at preserving and perpetuating this "sand spit" as the geologists call it for the generations to come.